

Liberation within Normativity: Meaning-making Strategies of Young Women Watching *Sex and the City*

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Introduction

The American TV series *Sex and the City* became immensely popular in Sweden, especially among women, when it first aired in the late nineties. Soon it built a steady fan base, women watching, discussing and identifying with the four heroines of the show. American television is generally popular in Sweden, but it is still somewhat surprising when it comes to *Sex and the City*, as the situation and values regarding sexuality and relationships – and what is possible to show on TV – is quite different in Sweden from the U.S. Research show that Swedes generally have a more positive view of short term relationships, casual sex and sex before marriage¹, and is a society regarded as very gender equal (which certainly is a matter which can and should be discussed). I wondered why women wanted to watch this very American series, how they regarded the way women, sex and relationships were pictured in the series and whether the show could fulfil important meaning-making functions in their lives. In a more general sense I have also been interested in how love and sexuality might function as a meta-narrative or a meaning system in which people – maybe especially women – interpret not only their experiences of love and relationships, but as a paradigm for what is important in life and how a good life (and a good woman) should be.

Being a sociologist of religion in the field of Media, Religion and Culture, this may seem a bit far off from the religion part. I have deliberately chosen an approach more focusing on meaning making than religion, more interested in function than substance, also focusing mainstream over the spectacular or extreme parts of popular culture. This is caused by the conviction that if we want to study what is ultimately important to human beings and what make their lives meaningful and understandable, we should not look for the exceptions but for normality and everyday expressions.²

¹ For examples, see Forsberg 2005 or Lewin 1998, the largest survey of sexual behaviour conducted in Sweden.

² This paper is based on my Masters Degree Thesis (D-uppsats) in Sociology of religion, Uppsala University from 2006, *Frigörelse inom normerna. En kvalitativ studie om kvinnors meningsskapande tolkningar av kärlek, sexualitet och kön i tv-serien Sex and the city*. Available in Swedish at <http://home.studentuu.se/maax0710/frigorelseinomnormerna.doc>

The transformation of intimacy – from romantic love to the pure relationship

One of the leading sociologists on the issues of late modernity and relationships is of course Anthony Giddens. In *The Transformation of Intimacy*³ he explores how late modernity has changed the way people in the western societies value love and relationships, and how the “romantic love complex” has declined as the model of confluent love has evolved⁴. An important part of the confluent love-model is what Giddens call the “pure relationship” – a relationship with no goal or justification outside of itself. Other important parts of the confluent love are equality, mutuality and equal exchange of emotions and intimacy as well as sexual pleasure. It distinguishes itself from the romantic love in several ways. An important aspect of romantic love is the strong focus on the complimentary roles of the genders and motherhood and home-making as the main tasks for women. That also makes the romantic love heterosexual by definition – the confluent love is equal and genderless, opening up for other possibilities for women as well as for homosexual relationships⁵. Giddens stresses the connection between women’s increasing power in society and the confluent love – as women got more power in society, they had the opportunity to demand more of their relationships. Giddens also advocates strengthening of confluent love as a way of making society more equal genderwise⁶.

Swedish social science scholar Margareta Forsberg has developed Giddens’ concepts in the Swedish context, as she explores how young women in a multi-cultural suburb of Gothenburg handle their lives and ideas concerning gender and sexuality. In her dissertation *Brunetter och blondiner (Brunettes and blondes)*⁷ she claims the romantic love-ideal to be still going strong, though in a different way than Giddens explains it. Forsberg claims that the romantic ideal is kept up by two things: the “love ideology” and heteronormativity⁸. The concept of the love ideology refers to the idea that you should be in love with, and/or in a long-term re-

³ Giddens 1992

⁴ Giddens 1992, p 61ff

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Giddens 1992, p 41f, p 53ff and p 196ff

⁷ Forsberg 2005.

⁸ Forsberg 2005, p 54f.

lationship with someone to have sexual relations with that person. It is no longer marriage, but love, that legitimizes sexuality⁹.

Identity as narrative and culture as tool kit

In an article on religious identity, Nancy T Ammerman uses the model of identity as narrative, used by Giddens among others.¹⁰ She distinguishes four kinds of narratives, out of which two are central: the *autobiographical narrative* – the story of one’s own life, as that person would tell it – and the *public narratives*, which are the stories of a society, a family, institutions, groups or cultures.¹¹ Identity is made in the crossing of the autobiographical narrative and the public narratives. Events in a person’s life can be put into the narrative of that person, and made meaningful in the light of other stories, public narratives. Ammerman makes clear that events or experiences in a person’s life are not narratives by themselves, but are made part of a narrative as they are told or remembered.¹²

”Narrative takes an event and makes it part of a plot, that is, an action-account. The event cannot do this for itself, but must be “emplotted” by the actors who must evaluate the various possible scenarios available to them. The events that become part of a narrative are selected from all that we know of the world. They are placed in a temporal order that implies causation and provides closure. And they are placed in a structure of relationships.”¹³

Ammerman stresses that identity is always both structured and constructed – a person can to a certain extent build his/her identity as he/she pleases, but at the same time there are boundaries depending on institutions and structures, often connected to gender, race, religion, age, class or ethnicity for example. No person’s identity is constructed completely outside the power structures of society.¹⁴

This line of argument is drawn further by Lynn Schofield Clark in *From Angels to Aliens*¹⁵ as she discusses identity and meaning making among young people interested in the supernatural. She puts the thought of identity as narrative in the context of popular culture, arguing that popular culture and media can be used as a cultural “tool kit” for making meaning,

⁹ Forsberg 2005, p 65ff

¹⁰ Ammerman 2003

¹¹ Ammerman 2003, p 213f

¹² Ammerman 2003, p 213

¹³ Ammerman 2003, p 213

¹⁴ Ammerman 2003, p 215f

¹⁵ Clark 2003

functioning as those stories or narratives that can make experiences or events meaningful.¹⁶ People use the stories or pictures of media and popular culture to make sense of the world. Clark also stresses that this identity making always takes place in the tension between structure and construction, between the agency of the individual and the structures of power in society.¹⁷ She also reflects on the fact that popular culture such as tv-series, computer games and movies often mirrors and expresses important values in the society they are produced in, and especially genre-movies such as western, sci-fi or “rom-com”, can function as an arena for solving or handling conflicts and ambivalence in the individual as well as society.¹⁸

If we read Ammerman and Clark in the light of Giddens and Forsberg, we might have reason to believe that the different ideals (the romantic love complex and confluent love) can work as such narratives, or that popular culture and the media can function as a tool kit to understand experiences of love and relationships, by telling the stories or giving examples of what love can or should be like. Stories of love, relationships and sexuality are constantly present in the media and popular culture, and a diversity of many different stories are told. These stories do not paint a single, uniform picture but are rather like a web or a multitude of different images, showing us varying and sometimes competing ideas of what love and sexuality are or should be like, how a good relationship works or what men and women are or should be. Together, these stories or narratives meet the narrative of the self, and they could function as this tool kit or – using the word of Alf Linderman¹⁹ – a repertoire of possible interpretations that helps the individual make sense of events in popular culture as well as events in her/his own life.

Young women watching Sex and the city – parallel stories are told

This was the theoretical background to my study of young women watching *Sex and the City*.

10 informants – all students at the University of Uppsala, ages 21-35 – were divided into two

¹⁶ Clark 2003, p 10

¹⁷ Clark 2003, p 12

¹⁸ Clark 2003, p 13

¹⁹ Linderman 1996, p 56f

focus groups, watched the same episode of the show, and were asked to discuss the episode especially in terms of how they interpreted the show but also if they connected the episode to their own experiences of love and relationships.²⁰ It turned out to be quite difficult to keep the discussion around this specific episode – most of the informants had watched every episode of the show and moved freely between episodes and seasons, making connections, associating and comparing. They also made connections between the show and their own lives or how they experienced norms and ideals about love, sexuality and being a woman, often sliding between fiction and reality, not always being clear about what they were referring to. In a qualitative study like this one, a number of interesting results or thoughts occur. I will only mention a few interesting ones in the light of what has been discussed above.

When the informants were asked to describe how they understand the show's message or view of relationships, they all mentioned *plurality*, or that everyone is allowed to be different or individual. There is not *one* right way to have a relationship – people are different, and can (and should) have different kinds of relationships or no relationship at all if that is preferred. When they described their own ideal relationship, the picture was very close to Giddens' model of confluent love – mutuality, equality and built on friendship as well as attraction, and this was also how they perceived the show's view of a good relationship.²¹ For just one example, I quote Johanna:

Yes, that's something I can really relate to, that this ideal you might have, it's really nothing to strive for, it might not be so great in the end. There is sort of... no model for how a relationship should be like or look like, it's completely up to... it's just the two persons in that specific relationship who can decide that. 'Cause sometimes you might think for yourself "is this normal, is this what it should be like, is this okay." But no one can decide that other than these two persons.²²

This being mentioned as the main "message", the informants also named the friendship between the women and the independence (from men) that comes with it, as important. They also recognized that there – in a more underlying or subtle way – was another norm or model for relation-

²⁰ Axner 2006, p 28ff

²¹ Axner 2006, p 32

²² Axner 2006, p 32

ships present, one much closer to the romantic love complex and a traditional role for women.²³

I will return to this soon.

As mentioned before, independence and female friendship was seen as central in the show, and was very appreciated by the informants. They made a strong connection between independence and being single, and also saw the risk that a relationship can be an obstacle in being independent, or even make independence impossible. This was according to the informants a highly gendered issue – it is especially important for a woman to be independent in order to be free and make her own choices in life. Independence is not only about relationships or emotions, it is a question of economy and education as well as being able to make decisions in one's life. Here is the link to Giddens again clear – confluent love and women's liberation are strongly connected. Unequal relationships are not only unequal in themselves, but hinder women in other areas of life as well.²⁴

The independence theme was especially discussed in relation to the ending of the series – the final episode. The ending was very present as the informants discussed, it was specifically analysed but also a clear point of reference throughout the whole session in both groups. In the end, all four main characters live in more or less traditional monogamous heterosexual relationships, a fact that the informants thought was odd considering the strong message of plurality and independence they saw throughout the whole series. They were especially disappointed with the fact that main character Carrie ends up with her constant love Mr Big, with whom she has an on-off relationship which never seem to change and where she always become dependant and he lets her down. Most of the informants thought a better ending would be her ending up being single – and happy.²⁵

Magdalena: So, it would have been a very interesting ending if she had come back from Paris being single, and that their friendship could continue no matter how...

Johanna: Yes, and you don't have to do just like everyone else, you can do your own thing.

Magdalena: Yeah, and even if you are married you can keep your girlfriends...

²³ Axner 2006, p 34

²⁴ Axner 2006, p 35

²⁵ Axner 2006, p 36f

Johanna: That would have been the best ending!

Gabriella: U-hu.

Johanna: I mean, if you want to send a message.²⁶

The informants recognized – some in a more conscious way than other – two different, parallel and competing ideals throughout the series. One can be called the ideal of the independent woman – a woman should be strong, take care of herself, have a career, have no man at all or if she has one, the relationship should be equal and confluent. Parallel to that is the romantic love complex still present – the “happy ending” where all a woman really wants is to find a man, focus on family and live happily ever after, adjust to her husband and forgetting about (or not wanting) any independence. To some extent, these two ideals also seem to be present in the real lives of the informants. When they talked about their own views and experiences, they presented the ideal of the independent woman – but still had to relate to and be conscious about the romantic love complex. This ambivalence is complicated, as the romantic love complex “should” not exist anymore according to the ideal of the independent woman. That made it hard to accept, and different strategies were used to negotiate between or handle the two competing ideals. Such strategies appearing in my interviews were resistance – seeing the clash and wanting to fight the inequalities and work for independence; denial – not accepting that there are any different norms for women and men or that people might not live exactly as they would like to; and (more frequently) distancing, a way to try to locate the romantic love complex and oppression of women further away, saying it does exist, but only in other countries/among younger people/some decades ago/among other kinds of people. Some also referred to plurality and free choice – some of the clashes between the ideals need not be solved, as people are different and make different choices.²⁷

Friend, supporter and challenger – functions of the show

In the interviews, a number of functions appeared as the informants were asked to mention what the show means to them, but also in other parts of the discussion. They gave examples and

²⁶ Axner 2006, p 37

²⁷ Axner 2006, p 40f

shared experiences, and they all seemed to have almost a relationship to the series. One of them even called it “a friend”. The functions they mentioned were also the kind of things you would expect from a friend – support, comfort, strength, confidence but also challenging and raising questions. They also talked about how the show gave examples or role models, as they discuss relationships, love and sex with their friends. The show were described as a “sounding board” or a place where you could find answers to your questions, and a place where you are forced or invited to reflect on important issues yourself, but also a “free zone”, a place where different ways of being a woman or having relationships could be tested. It was described as “therapy”, as the young women would watch it to make sense of their (non-working) relationships or to get a “second opinion”. Some examples:

Johanna: Still, it’s a little like it [*Sex and the city*] becomes a friend or what you should call it, you get like another view of things and you can see yourself in certain things and then you can see that... they reason in the same way as I do.

Teresa: You think yourself as well as you look... when I was younger and lived at home I used to watch, I discussed with my mother and my sisters. Now I watch with my roommate and we talk... sometimes we miss half the episode as we start talking instead of watching, all the things we think about from the show.²⁸

Katrine: (...) If I’m going out or if I’m doing something special and need some extra confidence or like that, I can think: ‘Tonight I’m gonna be like Miranda’ or ‘Now I’m gonna think like Samantha’ or now I’ll do... You can sort of pick up some extra strength...

Lisa: Isn’t that a little false? Or I mean, it’s not for real, couldn’t that be a bit dangerous?

Katrine: No, but isn’t it a little of both? It’s to find... Isn’t that what you have role models for? To know that, actually, you could be like that. Even if it’s not for real...

Lisa: You can become. Or at least maybe develop a bit.²⁹

One of the informants even described how she, living in a not-so-fulfilling relationship, started watching SATC late at night, and after a few weeks realized she wanted to be single, that it was possible for her to live on her own, and broke up with the boyfriend.

Lisa: (...) In my last relationship, it ended one and a half years ago, at the end, I was sort of depressed, not working. I had started watching the show and sort of stuck to it, I sat up every night watching... It raised some many questions within me, I thought it was great, it didn’t give me that many answers really, but it made me think. And I wanted to be single, because I wanted to live like them. It really got me thinking, should I break up or not? It really affected me a lot, this series.³⁰

²⁸ Axner 2006, p 46

²⁹ Axner 2006, p 45

³⁰ Axner 2006, p 45f

Even though the informants recognized – to different extents – that the romantic ideal is present, that the show mirrors an elite in certain ways and that the view of women might not be so independent as they want it to be, they still thought of the show as fulfilling a liberating or emancipatory purpose for them. Within the boundaries of normativity the show can be an arena or a “free zone” for trying different ways of being a woman, having relationships or expressing their sexuality. The title of this paper was formulated by one of the informants:

Katrine: One of my male friends, he really can't get why I like it so much, "You are such a feminist, how can you like it, it's crap!" But I think... it's sort of liberating within normativity, in some way... /.. / Even if they stay within the norms for women, they are strong, they talk dirty, and they do what they like. And if guys have a problem with that, then they probably have a problem with strong women. That's how I see it.³¹

All of these examples indicate that the women of my study use *Sex and the City* as a tool kit of different “keys” or tools to understanding their own experiences of love and relationships, in a reflexive manner letting the many narratives of the show meet the narratives of their everyday life as well as their autobiographical narratives. They let it affect them, giving examples and helping them understanding their lives as well as giving challenge and support, but they also bring their experiences with them as they watch – their understanding of the show is – of course – coloured by their own narratives. Still, there was no clear difference between informants of religious background and those without, when it came to how the show was perceived. One could guess that a person growing up with a more coherent meaning system would relate differently to narratives like the ones of the show, compared to a person without such a meaning system. My study is not large enough to falsify the thesis, but it gives no real support for it³².

Suggestions for future research

As these short examples show, there are many more interesting questions to be asked. Being such a small study, I wouldn't want to generalize the results too much, only noticing that the theoretical framework of Giddens on the one hand and Ammerman and Clark on the other, seems to be helpful to understand how the women in my study make sense of their favourite TV show as well as how they use it in every day life. Still, many questions are unanswered, and I

³¹ Axner 2006, p 3

³² Axner 2006, p 48ff

will make some suggestions on further possible research, hoping to get some more ideas or feedback from the audience later. Research in this field concerning television is rather rare in Sweden, and even though American and other foreign research lie far ahead, it is not always applicable to the Swedish context.

One interesting direction to go would be to explore *why* people choose a particular series to watch over time, or what makes certain series fulfil these functions sketched out here. Could any TV drama/comedy series do that, or if not, what is the quality that makes it “functional”? A gender perspective on that question would be needed, especially if concentrating on shows handling love and relationships. This kind of study would also be interesting to make with a different topic – such as series relating to death and non-death (i.e. Six feet under, True calling, Dead like me)

Another interesting angle would be to further develop the metaphor of identity as narrative, and the implications that has on how we interpret or make meaning out of the narratives of popular culture, especially TV series. In a (long term) TV series, the narrative and storytelling is much more complex than in a regular two hour movie, as it is running over a long time including more characters and longer storylines. It was clear in my study that the informants were very aware of the final episode and related the rest of the series to that episode. How is that related to what Ammerman says about making events into a story, placing events in a “temporal order that implies causation and provides closure” – events are meaningful as they can be understood to lead to an “ending” or a goal.³³ Without pushing it too far, there were also indications that the women of my study to some extent saw their own lives – or at least their love lives – as narratives heading for a happy ending. Also, the technological progress and new information technology has radically changed the way we watch television – popular series are not only aired several times in different channels, they are also available on dvd, “on demand” or for download. Instead of waiting a week for the next episode of your favourite show, you can watch a whole season in your ipod.

³³ Ammerman 2003, p 213

Television – as the media or popular culture as a whole – is not an isolated entity but to a large degree a part of and mirroring society as a whole. By further investigating how, why and what we watch, as well as what functions that TV dramas fulfil in our lives, we will continue exploring, maybe grasping some more angles on what is deeply meaningful and important to people as well as learning more about society or popular culture as a whole.

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